DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 899 FL 003 283

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TITLE Foreign Language Vocabulary Learning.
PUB DATE Feb 71
NOTE 6p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Information Retrieval; Instructional Program Divisions; Language Development; *Language Instruction; *Modern Languages; *Second Language Learning; Second Languages; *Vocabulary Development; *Vocabulary Skills

ABSTRACT

Criticism of traditional methods of foreign language vocabulary study points out the need for a well-organized and systematic approach to information retrieval. A dual method is proposed which involves a learning and retrieval unit. Detailed description of the two systems illustrates how the student may allot and use his revision time in the most economical way. (RL)

ED 062 899

Foreign language vocabulary learning

by

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February 1971.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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1. The problem is basically one of information retrieval. The student of a foreign language at any level is constantly finding new words and phrases, usually at a time, i.e. in the classroom, while reading etc., when it would be unreasonable to expect him to commit them to memory. These words must therefore be noted and learned later.

2. The traditional device for accomplishing this is the vocabulary book, which is presumably still being used by many people in the classic way; a small booklet with a red line ruled down the centre of the pages- on one side of this line the foreign lexical item and on the other the apparent English counterpart. Such books do have some value. Assuming the student notes the words in class and what he gathers they mean, and then later checks and if necessary corrects this at home with a dictionary, entering grammatical features such a gender etc., then two things are achieved a) The classroom session, or one aspect of it, is followed up and reinforced, as is the process of memorising.

b) The student has some record which he can consult for revision.

3. This is, however, very little for the effort expended and the drawbacks are many:

I. a) The written record is disorganised and within a relatively short time becomes very unwieldy - a student of any language up to '0' level can fill two or three standard books with ease. The result is that the student cannot refer back to a specific item (e.g. because it has cropped up again or because he realises that he misunderstood the word and wishes to correct the entry) without an extremely time-consuming search, the mere prospect of which will deter most.

b) In this disorganisation the student may enter the same word many times without realising it and thus fail to appreciate the relevance of this item to his course and/ or reading.

c) A large stock of items recorded in this way are hard to revise. Apart from the sinking feeling which will assail most people at the sight of page after page after page of lists, there is the problem of redundancy. Assuming the conscientious student mentioned above, let us imagine the student learns every five pages by heart as they become full, each page containing approximately twenty items. When the book is full it may contain 1,000 items and with the passage of time the student will have forgotten some of these whereas others will have become so familiar that the entry seems never to have been justified.

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However, to revise and find, let us say the 100 - 150 words he does not know the student must plough through ten times that number. A possible solution is to write these words in a different book but this has its dangers since some of the 850 - 900 words known at the time may be forgotten later and prove to be of some value.

d) Finally the whole format does not allow for expansion and revision of entries and the layout is such that the look may often be described as a "mess".

II. a) There are also theoretical objections to the whole idea of introducing students to an equation of L_1 lexical item = L_2 lexical item, on the grounds that such relationships, even when they obtain, are hardly very useful for anything other than technical terms and even then there are usually difficulties. To exemplify this is possible but I hope unnecessary. A more useful system therefore would show the lexical item's collocational restrictions.

b) Similar to IIa) above there is the problem of register which is hardly ever indicated in the dictionary beyond (collog.) and (vulg) and symbols showing the specialised technical terms.

III In cases where the student is not 'teaching himself' but is a member of a class this kind of vocabulary book is as good as useless to the teacher who, as far as I can see, can do nothing with it except perhaps give it a cursory glance every so often or employ those belonging to the more conscientious members of the class for spot tests.

This last is probably a minor blemish compared with those cited under I and II above, but nonetheless it is surely desirable that a teacher be able to assess and guide his pupils' work to some extent when it concerns an area as important as vocabulary in foreign language learning.

4. The following is a description of an alternative system to that critised above. This system is in theory for use at any level but in practice students below 'A' level or even more so below 'O' level would probably find the 'learning unit' more useful than the retrieval unit.

5. a) The system is divided into two parts

1. Retrieval Unit.
2. Learning Unit.

1. The retrieval unit consists of a number of 19 x 14 mm ring files and the corresponding sheets of paper ($7\frac{1}{2}$ x 13 mm). Alphabetical index sheets are useful. People with very large writing may require a larger size.

2. The learning unit consists of file cards, $7\frac{1}{2}$ x 13 mm being a convenient size, with one corner - top left or top right - having been removed, (this is merely so that one can see quickly if all the cards are the same way round), and four or five boxes large enough to hold a large number of cards.

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b) A certain number of reference books are also necessary to supply the information required. It is impossible to state a maximum since this depends rather on the time and money the student can afford, but the following are an essential minimum.

1. A dictionary or dictionaries $L_2 - L_1$ which cover all the vocabulary the student is likely to meet.

2. A stylistic, dictionary and/or good ordinary L_2 dictionary.

3. An L_2 thesaurus similar to Roget's in English or dictionary of synonyms.

6. On finding a new word the student adopts the following procedure.

1. He enters on one side of a sheet of paper from the retrieval unit

a) the word

b) all relevant grammatical features

c) the English equivalent(s) or explanation where no equivalent is available

d) examples of the word in L_2 sentences obtained from L_2 dictionary.

NB Where the word has several meanings c) and d) should be broken down as in a conventional dictionary.

On the other side he enters

e) the source of the new word

f) the date

g) synonyms, if necessary broken down as c) and d)

h) the L_2 definition of the word (for advanced students)

Derivatives and corresponding different parts of speech may either be included in the main entry or entered discretely depending on the amount of information. The latter is usually advisable.

2. On one of the cards from the learning unit he enters on one side the L_2 sentence with the new word underlined and on the other a translation of the sentence.

3. Sheets for 1) are stored alphabetically; cards for 2) in any order.

4. The student should first check that the word has not been entered before. If it turns out to already have been entered then the student, after checking that the entry is adequate for the new occurrence noted, should locate the card in the learning unit and enter the second sentence on the same card. As these cards are in no particular order this may involve some considerable searching. This is intended.

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5. Should these be a phrase in which no one word is appropriate as the referent of the phrase then the phrase could be entered in the learning unit and omitted from the retrieval unit. Similarly for cases where the meaning of the words are clear but their use in a particular construction is of interest.

7. The retrieval unit is thus formed by many sheets each referring to single words arranged in alphabetical order. Compared with the vocabulary book criticised above, it has the following advantages:

a) The reinforcement of the classroom work and memorization of new words is increased.

b) The written record is no longer disorganised, items can be found, new items added and incorrect ones discarded without difficulty.

c) The items are shown within the framework of their paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations and source and possibly information from the stylistic and/or L_2 dictionary will indicate to some extent the register in which the word is found when this is restricted.

d) The teacher has something to indicate the amount of work the student is doing both as regards vocabulary and extra-curricular reading and how it is being done. More important, especially at a lower level, if he constructs a retrieval unit for himself he may be able to assess more realistically students' performances on unseen translation tests since the unit is in effect a dictionary ideally containing an entry for each word the student has seen and no other.

8. There remains however the problem of how the student is to revise vocabulary as page after page after page in alphabetical order is probably even more disheartening a prospect than the lists. It is for revision that the learning unit is intended. It is used as follows:

1. Cards are allowed to accumulate in the first or 'To be filed' box until they reach a reasonable number, say fifty, or a reasonable amount of time has elapsed.

2. The student then gives himself a 'test' by looking at the L_1 side of the cards and attempting to reproduce THE WHOLE SENTENCE on the other side. On the basis of the results achieved he puts the card into one of three boxes; the first for those for which responses were immediately forthcoming and correct.

The second for those where the right answer came but only after deliberation and

The third for those where the answer was wrong or never came.

Each new card must go into one of these three boxes, after a time has been allowed so that the student really is remembering the word. It is then reassigned to the same or to a different box every time the student tests himself. This he should, of course, do periodically.

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With this unit the student can see at a glance his command of the vocabulary (and to some extent the grammar) which he is expected to know and can allot and use his revision time in the most economical way; for example when time is short by concentrating on only the one box of "not knowns". In a large unit it will eventually be necessary to have a fourth box for items which have become so familiar that revision of them is unnecessary. This fourth box need then only be checked annually or immediately prior to examinations etc.

While of course for general purposes L_1 - L_2 is probably the better test, the student can test himself L_2 - L_1 by simply reversing the cards.

This learning unit unlike the retrieval unit is suitable for students at the lowest level, and again stresses not only the lexical unit but puts it in a frame of syntagmatic relationships.

Finally to return to the point mentioned in 6.4) the student should find the card in the box of "not knowns" which it is hoped will contain the least cards anyway. If it is not there the search involved may help to "liven up" the system generally.

This system has one very great disadvantage, namely that it requires a great deal of time and effort on the student's part but then, so does learning a language.

D. Whiteley.